

Bridging the Recognition Gap: Rwanda's Foreign Degree Equivalency Process in Global Perspective

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Abstract: As Rwanda positions itself as a regional knowledge hub and transitions toward a competency-based education model, the recognition of foreign academic qualifications is essential for inclusive human capital development. This study critically examines Rwanda's degree equivalency process administered by the Higher Education Council (HEC), identifying structural and policy-level misalignments that undermine both global integration and national priorities. Guided by three research questions, the paper investigates: (1) the extent to which Rwanda's equivalency framework aligns with international standards, (2) the treatment of non-traditional qualifications such as online and distance education, and (3) the policy implications of these practices for Rwanda's knowledge-based economy. Drawing on comparative analysis with global recognition systems (e.g., SAQA, WES, ENIC-NARIC, Tokyo and Addis Conventions), the findings reveal that HEC's current practices — particularly the invigilation letter requirement for online graduates and rejection of non-linear learning pathways — often conflict with Rwanda's stated education reforms. These rigid requirements have created a space for misconduct and exploitation, where desperate applicants fall prey to fraudulent intermediaries, thereby jeopardizing institutional integrity. The paper argues that policy defensiveness against foreign online education stifles innovation and marginalizes valuable contributors who could enhance Rwanda's digital learning ecosystem. Recommendations include replacing invigilation barriers with technology-aided verification, engaging online-educated returnees in building domestic capacity, and establishing transparent, accountable guidelines to eliminate corruption vulnerabilities. Ultimately, aligning degree equivalency policy with modern learning models is not only a matter of fairness but a strategic imperative for national development.

Keywords: degree equivalency Rwanda, foreign qualifications recognition, online education policy, invigilation letter HEC, competency-based education Rwanda, corruption in education systems, knowledge-based economy reforms.

I. Introduction

As Rwanda aspires to become a knowledge-based economy and regional education hub, recognition of foreign academic qualifications is of paramount importance (WENR, 2019). Each year, thousands of Rwandans pursue higher education abroad. The data from 2021 shows that the US alone reported an increase of 215% of Rwandan students within a decade (KT Reporter, 2021). As recorded by UNESCO the number of Rwandan students who go abroad for tertiary education grows steadily (ICEF Monitor, 2025), driven by limited domestic capacity and the promise of specialized training overseas

(WENR, 2019). Upon return, their hard-earned degrees must be validated through the Higher Education Council (HEC)'s degree equivalency process to be accepted for local employment or further study. In theory, this process upholds quality standards. In practice, however, mounting evidence suggests HEC's policies are misaligned with global norms and may inadvertently undermine Rwanda's higher education and workforce development objectives.

In the era of globalization and digitization, educational mobility has become an essential pillar of national development, particularly for countries aspiring to build knowledge-based economies. Rwanda has embraced this vision with strategic clarity, pursuing reforms in education, science, and innovation (Carter et al., 2022). Yet, one critical bottleneck undermines this transformation: the process by which the Rwanda Higher Education Council (HEC) evaluates and recognizes foreign academic qualifications.

Globally, degree recognition mechanisms are evolving to accommodate non-traditional pathways, interdisciplinary degrees, and digital learning modalities (Klemenčič, 2018). Rwanda's current recognition policy framework, however, appears misaligned with these trends, raising fundamental questions about fairness, global competitiveness, and institutional readiness. One striking misalignment lies in HEC's insistence on linear academic pathways. The Council requires applicants to submit proof of each prior qualification in the traditional sequence (secondary certificate, Bachelor's, Master's, etc.) as a basis for recognizing a higher degree (Irembo, 2025). While ensuring academic progression is logical, this rigidity fails to accommodate "non-linear" routes increasingly common worldwide – for instance, programs that admit experienced professionals into Master's programs without a prior Bachelor's, or integrated Master's/PhD tracks.

Equally contentious is HEC's treatment of online and distance education credentials. Rwanda's HEC imposes additional verification hurdles on these degrees, notably the requirement of an "*invigilation letter issued by an accredited examination body*" for any foreign qualification earned through non-traditional (especially online) modes (Irembo, 2025). In effect, a Rwandan who pursued an online degree must produce evidence that their exams were supervised in-country by a locally accredited partner institution – a policy rarely seen elsewhere. Many reputable universities abroad offer high-quality online programs with rigorous proctoring or secure online assessments; yet HEC's rule can invalidate such degrees unless a local invigilation arrangement existed. This has led to reports of graduates from respected global institutions being denied equivalence for no reason other than study mode, fueling frustration among returnees and employers alike.

The stakes are high. Rwanda's pool of advanced degree holders is disproportionately populated by alumni of foreign institutions – particularly at the doctoral level, due to historically scarce PhD offerings at home (WENR, 2019). The University of Rwanda did not launch its first PhD programs until 2014, and it remains the only local university awarding doctorates (WENR, 2019). Consequently, the vast majority of Rwandan PhD holders earned their degrees abroad, as illustrated by 2022 data indicating over 1,000 PhD-qualified staff in Rwanda versus only a handful of locally trained PhDs (Ntirenganya, 2024; WENR, 2019). Figure

1 visualizes this imbalance, underscoring Rwanda's reliance on foreign-trained expertise. If recognition processes are cumbersome or outdated, the country risks underutilizing this critical human capital. Indeed, some returning

graduates have reported months-long delays in obtaining equivalence (despite HEC's official 7-day processing target), resulting in lost job opportunities and personal hardship (Mugabo, 2020).

Approximate Origin of PhD Qualifications Held by Academic Staff in Rwanda

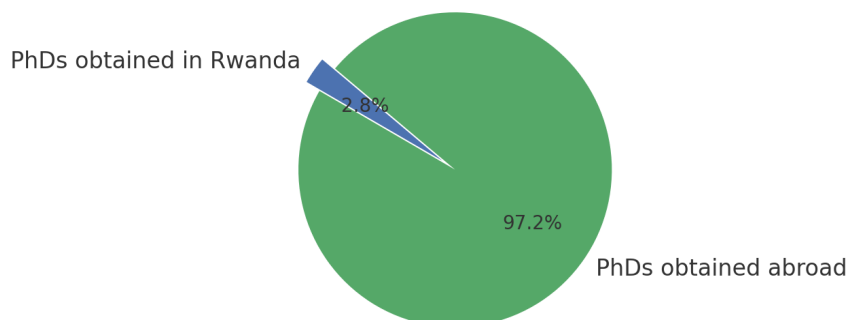


Figure 1: Estimated proportion of PhD qualifications among Rwanda's academic staff obtained abroad vs. domestically. Nearly all current PhD holders in Rwanda earned their doctorates abroad, reflecting limited local PhD training capacity (WENR, 2019; Ntirenganya, 2024).

This paper aims (1) To critically analyze the current degree equivalency framework in Rwanda, with a focus on alignment with international qualification systems; (2) To investigate the policy treatment and recognition challenges faced by graduates of online and distance education programs, particularly concerning invigilation and local institutional partnerships; (3) To evaluate the compatibility of Rwanda's degree equivalence requirements with its national goals, including the transition to a competency-based education model and the vision of a knowledge-based economy. The goal is to propose actionable, evidence-based recommendations for reforming HEC's degree equivalence policies, aiming to enhance fairness, technological responsiveness, and global competitiveness. We also inform policy makers, educators, and stakeholders in Rwanda and beyond on how to better align qualification recognition with both global standards and national development needs.

II. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative policy analysis approach, supplemented by descriptive statistics and case evidence. We conducted a document review of Rwanda's relevant laws, HEC guidelines, and application requirements for foreign degree equivalence. Key sources included official HEC communications (e.g., requirements listed on the Irembo online portal) and legal frameworks, such as the law establishing HEC's mandate (Sabiiti, 2023). To capture practical implications, we gathered reports from Rwandan media and stakeholder testimonies highlighting experiences with the equivalence process. Notably, cases of graduates facing denials or delays (e.g., alumni of Atlantic International University and Cavendish University) were analyzed via news articles and public statements (Sabiiti, 2023).

In parallel, we compiled statistical data to gauge the scale of foreign-educated graduates in Rwanda. This included UNESCO data on Rwandan students abroad and local reports on PhD holders in academia (WENR, 2019, Ntirenganya, 2024). Such data provides context on why efficient recognition matters for Rwanda's workforce. We also reviewed international recognition frameworks: for example, policy documents from World Education Services (WES), ENIC-NARIC network guidelines (embodying the Lisbon Recognition Convention principles), SAQA directives, and UNESCO's Addis Convention (2014) for Africa. These served as a benchmark to evaluate HEC Rwanda's policies against global norms.

No human subjects interviews were conducted; instead, secondary sources and published accounts form the evidence base. We triangulated information across multiple sources for reliability – for instance, cross-verifying an HEC requirement via both official portal text and independent reports. Where quantitative data are used (e.g., number of students abroad, processing times), they are presented in charts or tables for clarity. Citations follow APA 7th style in-text where applicable, and all connected sources are referenced to enable verification. Through this mixed-methods approach – combining policy analysis, case study, and comparative benchmarking – the research develops a holistic understanding of Rwanda's degree equivalence challenges and possible solutions.

III. Findings and Discussion

3.1. HEC Equivalency Policies and Structural Misalignments

Rwanda's HEC is statutorily empowered to “*compare, recognize and give equivalence to degrees*” earned abroad (Sabiiti, 2023). In executing this mandate, HEC has instituted criteria ostensibly to ensure foreign qualifications meet Rwandan standards (Nkurunziza, 2024). However, our analysis finds structural misalignments between these criteria and global qualification frameworks, particularly regarding required academic pathways and accreditation recognition.

One major misalignment is HEC's linear pathway enforcement. The application requirements demand a notarized copy of the diploma/degree that “*served as the basis to be admitted*” into the higher program (Irembo, 2025). In practice, this means an applicant for Master's equivalence must show proof of a prior Bachelor's, and a PhD holder must show their Master's (and indirectly, their Bachelor's). While this seems logical, it fails to consider non-traditional pathways increasingly permitted elsewhere. Many education systems allow for flexibility: for example, an individual with significant professional experience or a higher diploma might directly pursue a Master's without an undergraduate degree. Some U.K. and U.S. universities offer accelerated or integrated programs that bypass intermediate qualifications. Under HEC's current rules, such cases face rejection because the *paper sequence* is incomplete. This rigid stance is out of step with the UNESCO Global Convention on Recognition (entered into force 2023), which urges that recognition be based on the *learning outcomes and quality* of the qualification, unless substantial differences can be proven. It also contrasts with the Lisbon Recognition Convention in Europe, where authorities are encouraged to recognize foreign qualifications “unless a substantial difference” is shown – a

clause interpreted to avoid mechanistic refusals based on formal duration or sequence. Rwanda's insistence on a perfect linear academic history represents a legacy approach that can unjustly penalize otherwise qualified individuals, highlighting a structural disconnect with modern recognition practices.

Furthermore, HEC's understanding of accreditation abroad has shown misalignment with global norms. A prominent example emerged in 2022 when HEC withdrew equivalence certificates en masse from graduates of Atlantic International University (AIU) (Buningwire, 2022). HEC justified the decision by asserting AIU was "not accredited by any agency" in the U.S. (where AIU is based). In response, AIU alumni pointed out that the university is accredited by the Accreditation Service for International Colleges (ASIC) – a private accrediting body recognized by the U.S. Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) (Baningwire, 2022). This episode

revealed HEC's narrow view of accreditation, seemingly preferring a government-run accreditation agency (which the U.S. lacks at federal level) and discounting non-governmental accreditation recognized within the foreign system. The result was turmoil for graduates whose degrees had initially been equated but were suddenly invalidated (Baningwire, 2022). From a global perspective, what matters is whether the foreign institution is recognized by the appropriate authorities in its home country – whether through government or authorized quality assurance bodies. Most ENIC-NARIC centers and evaluators like WES follow this principle, placing trust in the foreign country's accreditation mechanisms. The AIU case thus underscores a misalignment: HEC's criteria did not accommodate a different accreditation model, pointing to a need for better understanding and flexibility in line with international standards.

Table 1 summarizes these structural differences, contrasting HEC Rwanda's policies with global best practices on key aspects of recognition.

Aspect	HEC Rwanda Policy	Global Best Practice
Basis of recognition	Requires strict documentation of prior degrees and formal exam processes for each level. Focus on formal equivalence of structure.	Recognize if the institution and qualification are accredited/recognized in the country of origin. Focus on quality and level, not rigid structural matching.
Non-linear pathways	Generally not recognized; e.g. a Master's without an accredited Bachelor's is likely denied equivalence due to missing prerequisite evidence.	Consider final qualification on its own merits. If an accredited institution awards a Master's, it is evaluated as such, even if the student's path was atypical, unless learning outcomes are substantially deficient.
Distance/Online degrees	Requires an invigilation letter from a locally accredited exam body for any foreign degree earned online or via	No extra invigilation documentation is typically required if the awarding institution's quality assurance is sound. Accredited online degrees are recognized <i>prima facie</i> . Evaluators may verify authenticity through

	distance learning. No letter means no equivalence.	transcripts and institutional confirmation, but do not demand local proctoring records.
Proof of student presence	Requires proof of physical residency during study (e.g., entry/exit stamps or a valid residency permit in the country of study), aimed at preventing fraud.	Emphasis on authenticity of documents rather than physical presence. Many systems trust the issuing university to confirm attendance and graduation. While proof of residency may be considered if fraud is suspected, it is not a blanket requirement.
Processing time	Officially 7 working days turnaround, but often subject to long delays (months in some reported cases) due to extensive verification with foreign institutions.	Most credential evaluation services have clear timelines (e.g., WES completes evaluations in roughly 7 business days after receiving all documents). Efficient electronic verification (e.g., via databases or universities) is employed to avoid undue delays.

Table 1: Comparison of Rwanda's HEC equivalence criteria vs. international recognition best practices.

As seen above, Rwanda's framework leans toward procedural rigidity – requiring specific proofs and processes – whereas international best practices prioritize the substance of accreditation and qualifications. The next sections examine how these policy stances play out in the context of online degrees and real-life cases, and their broader implications.

3.2. HEC's Stance on Online & Distance Education Degrees

Globally, online and distance education has moved from the periphery to the mainstream, especially accelerated by technological advances and necessity (e.g. during the COVID-19 pandemic). Reputable universities now offer online degrees that maintain high academic standards. However, HEC Rwanda's current policy exhibits a clear skepticism toward online education. The requirement of an *invigilation letter* for any foreign qualification earned through distance learning is a telling indicator (Irembo, 2025). This letter must come from an “*accredited examination body*” and presumably verify that

the student's exams were supervised under approved conditions. Although the policy language may vary — sometimes phrased as “*proof of online assessment*” — HEC evaluators consistently interpret this as an invigilation letter from a Rwandan institution formally partnered with the foreign university (HEC Rwanda, 2025). In fact, in the Rwandan HEC context, that often implies a partnership with a local higher learning institution or exam center. This effectively means that all foreign institutions in the world must establish partnerships with local HEC-accredited universities for their degrees to be recognized — an impractical and unrealistic demand that acts as a non-tariff barrier. Rather than building Rwanda's capacity in digital education, this policy penalizes those who seek global solutions to local educational gaps (Patra, 2021).

In theory, ensuring exam integrity is important. In practice, this blanket requirement has been controversial. Many foreign institutions do not partner with local entities for exam proctoring; instead, they employ secure online proctoring, or require students to attend occasional intensives abroad. A Rwandan who

completes, say, an online Master's from the University of London or Penn State World Campus would likely have no "invigilation letter" to show, despite holding a legitimate degree. Under HEC rules, this graduate might be denied equivalence outright – essentially, *the mode of study eclipses the merit of the degree*. Local news outlets have reported that students especially those who studied in Asia and Europe face hurdles at HEC, often having fulfilled all listed requirements yet still not obtaining their equivalences (Mugabo, 2020). It is plausible that online/distance graduates form a significant subset of those struggling, given the additional demands placed on them.

A notable case illustrating HEC's stance was the Atlantic International University (AIU) incident discussed earlier. AIU is an online institution; aside from the accreditation dispute, HEC's public statements and internal rationale likely also questioned the *mode* of delivery. HEC explicitly cautioned that even the supposed accreditor (ASIC) was not a government agency (Buningwire, 2022), hinting at distrust in the quality assurance of such programs. Another case involved Cavendish University Uganda, a regionally accredited private university that offers some distance learning options. In 2020, HEC rejected the degrees of dozens of Rwandan graduates from Cavendish, many of whom had been working as teachers (Buningwire, 2021). The graduates were told they must undergo a one-year "reintegration course" at local institutions to make up for perceived gaps (Buningwire, 2021). The curriculum they had to retake – including Rwandan history and education modules – suggested HEC doubted the content or format of their distance-learning program (Buningwire, 2021). The Education Minister later explained that some Cavendish degrees did not meet HEC's format criteria (for

instance, issues with entry qualifications and credit load) and thus were not equivalent to the corresponding Rwandan degrees. While Cavendish University is accredited in Uganda, HEC's action implied that format (e.g., perhaps the use of weekend/online classes) and content differences were substantial enough to deny automatic recognition. Only after the affected graduates petitioned Parliament and the Ministry was a compromise reached – the "remedial" courses – instead of a flat refusal (Buningwire, 2021).

These examples underscore a pattern: HEC requires foreign distance degrees to mirror traditional, in-person programs in structure and oversight. This contrasts with how many other systems treat distance credentials. South Africa's SAQA, for example, evaluates foreign qualifications by validating the awarding institution's status and the credential's authenticity. A distance MBA from an accredited UK university would typically be recognized as equivalent to an MBA, full stop. World Education Services (WES) similarly makes no distinction on the mode of study in its equivalence assessments; an online degree from a regionally accredited U.S. university is evaluated on face value – the transcripts and diploma either are authentic and meet degree requirements or they don't. There is no blanket requirement for, say, a letter from a proctor. In Europe, the approach is increasingly to be "*mode-neutral*": the 2018 *Tokyo Convention* (Asia-Pacific Regional Recognition Convention) explicitly states that no discrimination shall be made based on the mode of study, and while the Addis Convention (Africa) does not explicitly mention online learning, its spirit of fair recognition would discourage unwarranted distinctions.

The risk for Rwanda is that an overly defensive stance on online education can isolate the country from global educational innovation. For example, recent guidance from Jisc in the UK recommends secure digital proctoring as an acceptable standard for remote assessments, a move adopted by numerous British institutions as part of post-pandemic educational reforms (Pauli, 2021). Online degrees have enabled thousands of Africans to access quality education that might otherwise be out of reach. By enforcing conditions that even top-tier universities' alumni cannot meet, HEC might bar a segment of skilled graduates from contributing at home. At a time when Rwanda is investing in ICT and even hosting international online universities (e.g., the regional Carnegie Mellon University Africa program, which blends online and face-to-face elements), a reconciliatory policy is needed. The requirement for invigilation letters could be reformed into a more flexible verification of academic integrity – for instance, requesting a letter from the university confirming that the degree was earned through assessed work in line with its quality standards, or proof of a secure online proctoring record, rather than insisting on a local exam venue which might not have been part of the program design. We will return to this in the Recommendations section. Instead of viewing online graduates as a threat to quality, Rwanda can view them as a valuable asset in building its own competitive online education ecosystem. These graduates have firsthand knowledge of what constitutes a well-designed online program—from modular learning and virtual labs to academic integrity tools. Their experiences can be harnessed to help local institutions pilot credible online and blended learning models. Encouraging innovation, not

imposing restrictions, is what will prepare Rwanda for the next era of higher education.

3.3. Prevalence and Consequences: Foreign-Educated Graduates in Limbo

To appreciate the impact of HEC's stringent criteria, one must consider the scale of foreign-educated graduates in Rwanda. Rwanda's higher education system, while growing, still has limited capacity at advanced levels. Prior to 2014, as noted, no local institution offered PhDs (WENR, 2019), and even today only the University of Rwanda does, with relatively small annual cohorts. The natural outcome is that a large share of Rwandans with doctorates – whether working in academia, government, or industry – obtained them from universities abroad. Recent data from the Rwandan Ministry of Education indicated that in 2022 there were 1,083 academic staff holding PhDs across the country, of whom only 162 (15%) were women (Ntirenganya, 2024). Given UR's nascent PhD programs, it is evident that the vast majority of those 1,083 PhDs are from foreign universities. The 15 % share of female PhD holders is not merely descriptive; it interacts with the recognition regime in structural ways. Women are statistically more likely to pursue flexible, online, or part-time study modes to reconcile family and career responsibilities (UNESCO, 2024). Because such programmes often lack local “*link partners*” required under the invigilation-letter policy, female returnees face a double hurdle: invisible care labour followed by institutional suspicion. In effect, the equivalency apparatus reproduces what Crenshaw (1991) terms *intersectional vulnerability*, where gendered constraints are amplified by procedural gate-keeping. Publishing sex-disaggregated processing times

and success rates would be a first step toward diagnosing—and redressing—this hidden inequity. Even if UR has produced, say, a few dozen PhDs since 2014, that likely accounts for under 5% of the total pool (as illustrated in Figure 1). In other words, Rwanda's research and teaching capacity heavily depends on credentials earned overseas.

The story is similar, though less extreme, at the Master's level. Many Rwandan professionals in fields like public health, engineering, education, and finance have pursued Master's degrees through scholarships or self-funding abroad. Some went to neighboring countries (Uganda, Kenya, etc.), others to Asia or Western countries. UNESCO statistics show that in 2017, about 4,839 Rwandan students were enrolled in degree programs abroad (WENR, 2019) – a high outbound mobility rate of ~6%, which was even higher (15%+) in the early 2000s when domestic opportunities were scarcer (WENR, 2019). Although more local institutions and programs have emerged, the government itself continues to sponsor students for graduate training abroad as an investment in human capital (WENR, 2019). Upon return, all these graduates need HEC equivalences to fully utilize their qualifications (especially for public sector jobs or further studies).

The consequences when equivalences are delayed or denied can be severe at both individual and systemic levels. On the individual side, Rwandan graduates have reported losing job offers due to pending equivalence certificates. For instance, one graduate from China recounted waiting over five months (and counting) for HEC to issue his equivalence, far exceeding the promised 3-7 day timeline (Mugabo, 2020). He missed out on at least three

job opportunities because employers required an equivalence certificate, which he couldn't obtain in time (Mugabo, 2020). Another common scenario is graduates unable to enroll in further studies (e.g., a PhD program at UR) or register with professional boards because HEC has not recognized their prior degree. Even those ultimately granted equivalence suffer from the delay: months of career stagnation, financial stress, and emotional distress as they navigate bureaucracy.

Beyond delays and lost opportunities, the ambiguity and opacity of the equivalency process has opened the door to unethical practices. Several equivalency-seekers have reported being approached by intermediaries or fraudulent individuals claiming to have connections within HEC or with institutions allegedly partnered for invigilation purposes. These actors often solicit bribes or fees under the pretense of "facilitating" the process, only to disappear or deliver nothing (Sabiiti, 2024). Others attempt to fabricate invigilation documents or forge links with supposed local collaborators, further undermining the integrity of the system (Mbonyinshuti, 2024). Such misconduct not only exploits desperate graduates but erodes public trust in Rwanda's education system and casts doubt on the country's ambition to become a regional knowledge hub (Hakizimana, 2024). A system built on unpredictability will always be vulnerable to manipulation — highlighting the urgent need for procedural clarity, transparency, and institutional accountability (Sabiiti, 2023).

Drawing on Michel Foucault's conception of knowledge/power, the degree-equivalency process operates as a *sovereign filter* that determines whose learning counts as "*truth*" within Rwanda's formal

economy (Foucault, 1977). By privileging hard-copy documentation over demonstrated competence, the Higher Education Council (HEC) reproduces what Miranda Fricker calls *epistemic injustice*—the systematic disqualification of knowers on the basis of institutionally encoded prejudice (Fricker, 2007). Consequently, graduates returning from alternative or online pathways are rendered

“credible outsiders,” compelled to provide redundant proofs while locally conferred degrees receive tacit legitimacy. The policy debate therefore transcends administrative efficiency and implicates Rwanda’s normative landscape of knowledge itself.

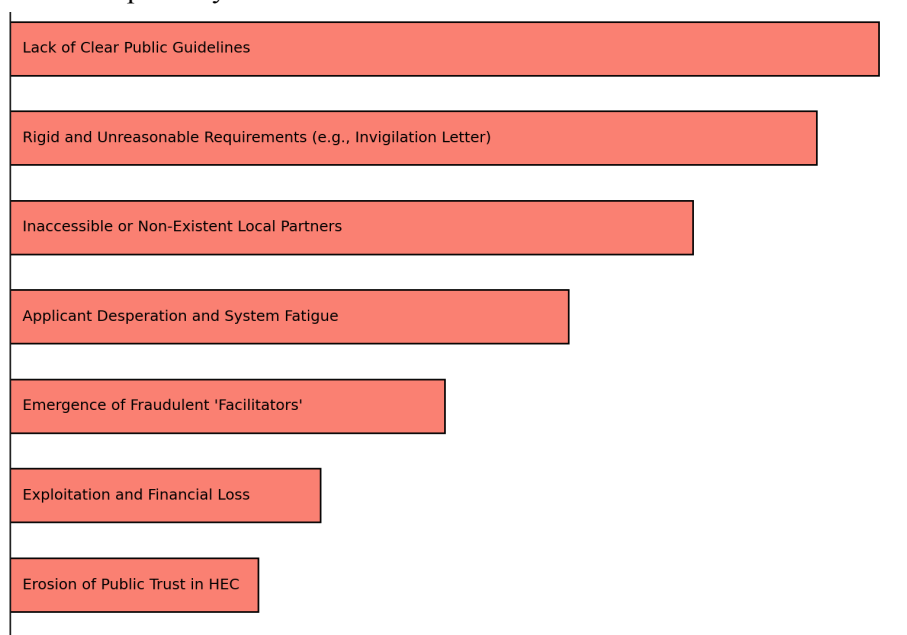


Figure 2. Systemic Vulnerabilities: How Unclear Policies Enable Corruption in the Equivalency Process

At a systemic level, these obstacles create a brain waste problem: Rwanda invests in sending students abroad (or benefits from their private investment), but upon their return, an antiquated process hampers their integration into the economy. In the health sector, for example, if a doctor earns a specialization abroad but faces protracted verification, that’s a qualified specialist sitting idle in a country where such skills are needed. In academia, universities hiring faculty with foreign credentials have faced uncertainty; in one case, private universities in Rwanda suddenly found some faculty’s equivalences cancelled (after the AIU

decision), putting their teaching appointments in jeopardy (Buningwire, 2022). This kind of instability also undermines Rwanda’s attractiveness to international talent: foreign academics or diaspora Rwandans might think twice before relocating if their hard-won degrees might not be recognized promptly.

The case studies of AIU and Cavendish University graduates illustrate these consequences. AIU alumni – including some who had been employed as lecturers and in NGOs – not only had their equivalences revoked but also came under investigation for allegedly

using “*forged documents*”, since once HEC declared the equivalence void, it was as if they had no valid degree (Buningwire, 2022). One lecturer was even investigated by law enforcement for using an HEC certificate that HEC itself had issued but later nullified (Buningwire, 2022). Though the intent was to crack down on dubious degrees, the process painted all such graduates with a broad brush, causing reputational damage and fear. In the Cavendish case, graduates who believed they had earned legitimate degrees had to bear additional costs to “re-qualify” in Rwanda, effectively repeating a year of study and delaying their careers by that much.

It is important to note that not all foreign degrees are equal, and HEC is right to be vigilant against diploma mills and fake credentials. The impulse behind some of its strict measures is understandable: there have been global and local instances of people obtaining fraudulent degrees or degrees from unaccredited institutions. However, a balance must be struck so that the many legitimate graduates are not unduly penalized in the process of filtering out a few bad actors. Other countries manage this balance by maintaining lists of recognized institutions, rapidly verifying credentials with issuing universities, and having an appeals process where applicants can provide additional evidence if initially denied. Rwanda’s current approach, by contrast, has been described by observers as treating every foreign degree with suspicion, unless proven otherwise via onerous documentation. This presumption can be flipped: treat every accredited foreign degree as valid unless specific doubts arise.

In summary, the prevalence of foreign-educated graduates in Rwanda’s talent pool means HEC’s policies have wide-reaching

impact. The consequences of misalignment – delays, denials, forced academic do-overs – not only affect individual careers but also Rwanda’s national goals of accelerating development through skills and knowledge. The next section will delve into those national goals and how they clash with the status quo, after we examine how other systems handle these issues.

3.4. Global Best Practices in Recognition vs. Rwanda’s Approach

To contextualize Rwanda’s equivalence process, we compare it with global best practices from several systems:

- **ENIC-NARIC (Europe):** Under the Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) framework, the default is to recognize foreign qualifications that are properly issued in another LRC country, unless a substantial difference in program content or outcomes is demonstrated. Recognition is intended to be fair, prompt, and transparent. *Non-discrimination* is a key principle – meaning the recognition process should not discriminate based on origin, language, or mode of study. European countries have centers (NARICs) that issue recognition statements but increasingly also trust each other’s accreditation systems. If someone earned a Master’s in France via an unusual pathway, a German NARIC would still recognize the Master’s if the awarding French institution is accredited, rather than question how the person got in. This demonstrates flexibility and trust in institutional quality assurance across borders.

- **World Education Services (WES):**

WES, a prominent service used in the U.S. and Canada, evaluates foreign academic credentials for equivalence. WES prioritizes verifying two things: that the institution is accredited/recognized and that the documents (transcripts, diplomas) are authentic and issued according to proper procedures (WENR,2019). It does not, for instance, require proof of how many hours you sat in class or whether your exams were proctored in person. If WES encounters a credential from an unrecognized institution or an unearned degree, they simply refuse to evaluate it or flag it. But for accredited institutions, WES's approach is accommodating of differences in educational systems. They also process evaluations relatively quickly, leveraging digital verification where possible. WES reports illustrate equivalences like *"Master's degree (USA equivalent)"* regardless of whether the original was done online or on-campus – mode is not specified in the equivalence report, only the level and field.

- **South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA):**

SAQA's Foreign Qualifications Evaluation and Advisory Services is often referenced in African recognition discussions. SAQA requires applicants to submit their foreign qualifications and proof of the awarding body's status (often a website or official letter confirming the institution's recognition). They also insist on transcripts. SAQA does not, however, demand evidence of the student's

residency or exam invigilation; it relies on the authenticated transcripts to reflect that the student completed the program. If a qualification is from a recognized institution, SAQA usually will issue a certificate stating the South African NQF level equivalent (e.g., *"Honours level"* or *"Master's level"*). Where issues arise, it is typically because the institution was bogus or the documentation suspect, not because the format of study was different. This shows a focused scope: SAQA's mandate is to say *"is this qualification real and what is its level?"* – not to police whether the person took online classes or had a supervisor physically present.

- **East African Benchmarks.** Kenya's Commission for University Education (CUE) introduced an online *"Recognition and Equation of Qualifications"* (REQ) portal in 2022 that issues provisional recognition letters within seven working days for fully documented cases (CUE, n.d.). Tanzania's Commission for Universities (TCU) operates the Foreign Awards Assessment System (FAAS), enabling applicants to track real-time progress and download digital equivalence certificates, thereby reducing face-to-face visits to zero (TUC, n.d.). Both systems demonstrate that rapid, user-centric recognition is feasible in resource-constrained contexts—rendering Rwanda's paper-heavy workflow a policy choice rather than an inevitability.
- **UNESCO Addis Convention (2014) & African Harmonization:** The Addis

Convention, which came into force in 2019, is Africa's regional agreement on recognition of qualifications. Rwanda is among the African nations that have been involved in its development (though ratification status should be checked; as of 2021, about 13 countries had ratified). The Addis Convention advocates for transparent, fair, and prompt recognition procedures across Africa, much like the LRC. It encourages development of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and mutual recognition based on learning outcomes. Notably, it supports recognition of *non-traditional learning* such as open and distance learning, as long as they are quality-assured. UNESCO's guidance under Addis is that each country should avoid unnecessary obstacles in recognizing qualifications from other African states, to promote mobility and cooperation (UNESCO, 2025). In parallel, the East African Community (EAC) has declared a Common Higher Education Area in 2017, committing to harmonize standards and ease recognition among member states. This means, in principle, a degree from an EAC country like Uganda or Kenya should be readily recognized in Rwanda (and vice versa) barring serious quality concerns. The Cavendish University fiasco, where degrees from a fellow EAC country were initially rejected, indicates Rwanda has room to better align with this regional commitment.

From these best practices, a few common themes emerge: institutional accreditation is key, the onus is on evaluators to

justify non-recognition (rather than on graduates to prove every element), and flexibility is built in to handle different education models. Rigid criteria like “we don't recognize any Master's less than two years” or “online degrees need extra proof” are generally avoided; instead, each case is considered holistically against broad standards. There is also an emphasis on speed and service orientation – recognition is seen as facilitating mobility, so processes are streamlined to serve applicants efficiently.

Comparatively, HEC Rwanda's approach appears outdated and overly restrictive. It mirrors an era when distrust of foreign qualifications was high and when non-traditional modes were rare. The world has moved on, and so too have Rwanda's own aspirations. The next section discusses how these policies conflict with Rwanda's strategic goals and the ethos of competency-based, flexible learning that the country itself is championing domestically.

3.5. National Goals vs. HEC Criteria: A Policy Contradiction

Rwanda's education and development policies in the 21st century have been nothing short of ambitious. The government's Vision 2020 (and now Vision 2050) frameworks explicitly call for building a knowledge-based economy and enhancing human capital. In the education sector, reforms have focused on quality and relevance. For example, Rwanda overhauled its curriculum to a competency-based curriculum (CBC) in 2015 for primary and secondary education, aiming to shift away from rote learning to skills and critical thinking (WENR, 2019). Continuous assessment and adaptability are emphasized, and ICT integration is a priority (WENR, 2019). At

the higher education level, Rwanda has welcomed international universities and cross-border partnerships, recognizing the value they bring. The presence of institutions like Carnegie Mellon University Africa, African Leadership University, and others in Kigali reflects a commitment to innovative and globally connected tertiary education.

Given this progressive agenda, the current HEC equivalence criteria stand out as anachronistic. The insistence on rigid inputs (seat time, exam format) over outputs (competencies gained) is exactly the kind of old model that competency-based education reforms seek to overcome. This contradiction is especially stark given that competency-based education prioritizes demonstrated outcomes over formal seat-time or invigilated exams (or rigid academic sequencing) — yet HEC's current equivalency framework insists on supervised examination as proof of quality, which directly opposes the principles Rwanda has adopted in its own national curriculum reform (UNESCO, 2022). Yet HEC's equivalency process continues to emphasize formal structures over outcomes, making it difficult to recognize degrees built on the very principles Rwanda promotes at home. Domestically, Rwanda is saying that what matters is students' mastery of skills and knowledge, not just time spent in class. Yet, in evaluating foreign degrees, HEC seems to revert to a tick-box approach of verifying time and format. This contradiction can send mixed signals. For instance, a Rwandan who pursued a cutting-edge competency-based online degree in a tech field might find that Rwanda's system doesn't know how to validate it — even if that is precisely the kind of learning Rwanda extols in concept. Moreover, graduates of global online programs often return with advanced exposure

to digital pedagogies and emerging technologies (OECD, 2023) — assets that Rwanda urgently needs to enhance its own higher education ecosystem. By sidelining these individuals through restrictive equivalency requirements, Rwanda not only loses the opportunity for knowledge transfer but also suppresses potential catalysts for innovation in its education sector.

Dimension	Competency-Based Education (CBE)	HEC Rwanda Equivalency Criteria
Assessment Type	Mastery-based, project-oriented, self-paced assessments	Invigilated, time-bound examinations
Learning Progression	Progress based on demonstrated skills	Fixed academic progression (Bachelor → Master)
Credential Evaluation Focus	Skills and competencies acquired	Duration, seat-time, and institutional formality
Flexibility of Delivery	Highly flexible (blended, online, modular)	Prefers traditional classroom formats
Recognition of Learning Pathways	Non-linear, prior learning recognized	Sequential and institution-based recognition
Verification of Learning	Portfolio, peer review, digital badges	Requires physical exam verification via invigilation

Table 2. Misalignment Between Competency-Based Education and Rwanda's Degree Recognition Criteria

Moreover, as Rwanda positions itself as a regional hub, it will increasingly attract foreign students and academics. The Addis Convention and the African Union's work on an African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF) are aligned with the idea of easy portability of qualifications across borders (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2025). If Rwanda's recognition process remains excessively rigid, it could become a bottleneck in regional academic

exchange. It would be ironic if a country known for its innovation and ease of doing business becomes known as difficult in recognizing academic credentials.

On the economic front, Rwanda's drive for a knowledge economy implies tapping into global expertise and encouraging Rwandans to gain world-class education. The government actively sends students abroad on scholarships in fields like medicine, engineering, and agriculture – an implicit trust that those foreign programs will produce valuable skills (RDB, 2019). To then devalue or delay the utilization of those skills upon return is counter-productive. For example, if 10 Rwandan scholars earn PhDs in renewable energy in a top foreign university, they are exactly the kind of human resource needed to achieve energy and environmental goals. Imposing bureaucratic hurdles that keep them from lecturing or researching immediately diminishes the return on that investment.

There is also a policy coherence issue. HEC's stringent rules might have made sense in an earlier era of quality concerns, but Rwanda now has multiple layers of quality assurance: institutional audits, program accreditation for local universities, and participation in regional quality frameworks (Imaniriho, 2020). An underlying concern is that the gatekeepers of Rwanda's equivalency process — often trained through traditional academic systems — may inadvertently favor those same systems, resisting alternative forms of learning they themselves did not experience. This entrenched bias risks anchoring the country to outdated paradigms and may obstruct the systemic transition toward flexible, future-proof education models. Trusting foreign accreditation can be seen as an extension of trusting one's own system to engage internationally. Rwanda's formal policy on

recognition of foreign qualifications (Ministerial Order N° 003/MINEDUC/2021) and its ratification of the UNESCO Regional Convention support this openness (MINEDUC, 2021). If every country were to adopt a policy like HEC's, it would defeat the purpose of multilateral recognition agreements and make academic mobility very difficult. Rwanda cannot advocate for others to recognize its new qualifications (for instance, those granted under the Competency-Based Curriculum or new universities) if it does not reciprocate with a reasonable openness to theirs.

In summary, Rwanda's national educational philosophy and economic vision emphasize competence, innovation, and openness. HEC's outdated criteria — focused on formalities such as invigilation letters and linear trajectories — are at odds with these values. This policy dissonance risks slowing Rwanda's momentum toward its goals. The silver lining is that it is rectifiable: policy criteria are easier to change than deep structural issues. In the next section, we provide actionable recommendations to reform Rwanda's degree equivalency process, aligning it with both global best practices and the country's forward-looking agenda. These recommendations aim to ensure that Rwanda's talent, whether home-grown or globally cultivated, can be effectively recognized and deployed for national development, and that Rwanda can lead in East Africa as a model of modern, fair qualification recognition.

IV. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion: Rwanda stands at an important juncture in higher education policy. On one hand, the nation has boldly embraced

reforms to produce a 21st-century education system and has leveraged international partnerships to complement its domestic capacity. On the other hand, the mechanism for recognizing foreign-earned qualifications – a mechanism meant to capitalize on global learning – has not kept pace with these advancements. Our analysis of HEC's degree equivalency process reveals a tapestry of misaligned criteria, unintended barriers, and missed opportunities.

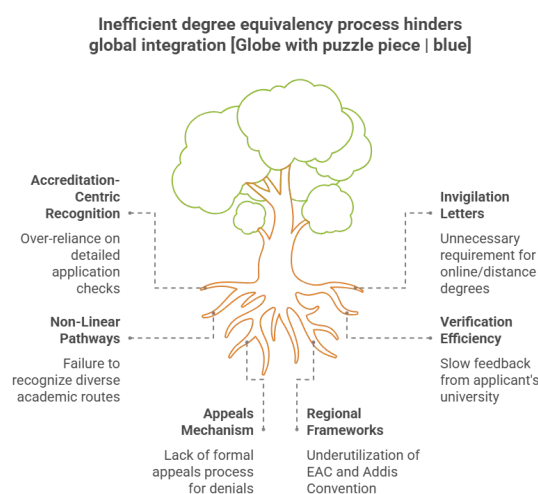
Key findings highlight that HEC's stringent requirements (such as proof of every prior academic step and extra hurdles for non-traditional learning) are out of alignment with global conventions that prioritize trust in accredited institutions and flexibility in recognition. These misalignments have tangible consequences: qualified individuals face undue delays or denials, employers and universities lose out on talent, and Rwanda's reputation as a rising knowledge economy is put at risk. Cases like the revocation of AIU alumni equivalences and the remedial schooling mandated for Cavendish graduates demonstrate the human impact of policy choices, as well as a clear need for policy recalibration.

The good news is that Rwanda's situation is not unique nor irreparable. Around the world, many countries have modernized their recognition policies precisely to address similar challenges, often in the context of international conventions or regional frameworks. Rwanda itself has shown the capacity for quick policy innovation in other domains – from business regulation to public health – when aligned with leadership vision. The education sector can be no different. By reforming its approach to foreign degree equivalency, Rwanda can remove friction in its skills ecosystem and send a

message that it is truly open for global talent exchange.

The findings across Sections 3.1 to 3.5 collectively address our core research objectives, revealing systemic misalignment between Rwanda's foreign degree recognition process and its strategic commitment to internationalization, competency-based learning, and knowledge-driven development. The contradiction between HEC's current criteria and Rwanda's own goals (competency-based education, knowledge economy, regional integration) is striking. Bridging this gap is not merely a technical tweak; it is a strategic necessity. As Rwanda looks to the next decade, with initiatives to become a regional technology and finance hub and to host more international academic programs, ensuring a fair, efficient, and futures-oriented recognition system will be foundational. It will help retain Rwandan talent, attract foreign expertise, and foster confidence in the country's academic and professional environment.

In conclusion, while HEC's mandate to uphold standards is vital, its procedures must evolve to reflect trust in quality assurance, both local and foreign, rather than distrust by default. The findings of this study make it evident that reforming the degree equivalency process is both possible and urgent. By doing so, Rwanda can align its policies with the best practices globally and in Africa, remove unnecessary roadblocks for its citizens, and better harness the fruits of international education for national development. The following recommendations provide a roadmap for such reform, ensuring that Rwanda's aspirations and policies move in concert rather than conflict.



Recommendations: Based on the above analysis, we propose the following evidence-based recommendations for Rwanda's Higher Education Council and related policy-makers. These steps aim to modernize the degree equivalency process, aligning it with international standards and Rwanda's strategic goals, while safeguarding academic quality.

1. Adopt an Accreditation-Centric

Recognition Model: Shift the primary basis of equivalence decisions to whether the foreign institution and program are accredited/recognized in their home country. If a qualification comes from an officially accredited university (as per that country's authorities or recognized quality assurance bodies), HEC should generally recognize it. This would align Rwanda with practices of WES, SAQA, and ENIC-NARIC, which prioritize institutional recognition (Buningwire, 2022). HEC can maintain a list (regularly updated) of recognized accreditation bodies worldwide and rely on networks like ENIC-NARIC for verification. This reduces the need for applicants to prove every detail of their

study if the credential itself is sound.

2. Eliminate the Blanket Requirement for Invigilation Letters:

Remove or relax the requirement of an invigilation letter from a local body for online/distance degrees (Irembo, 2025). Instead, implement a case-by-case verification mechanism. For example, if an application is for an online degree, HEC could request a letter or email confirmation *directly from the awarding university* about the mode of study and assessment integrity. Most reputable universities will gladly confirm that a student completed assessments under proper conditions (whether online proctoring or otherwise). This places the onus on institutions (which are better positioned to vouch for quality) rather than on graduates to obtain a practically unattainable letter. It also differentiates between degrees that might truly lack rigor and those that are simply different in delivery.

3. Recognize Non-Linear Academic Pathways:

Update equivalence guidelines to acknowledge that some foreign qualifications may be obtained via non-traditional routes (e.g., a Master's earned without a prior Bachelor's, through recognition of prior learning or integrated programs). If the final qualification is accredited and comparable to a Rwandan qualification in level and outcomes, it should be recognized *as such*. HEC can include an explanatory note on the equivalence certificate if needed (e.g., "Master's degree – accessed via alternative

pathway”), but should not deny the equivalence itself. This ensures that individuals who earned their competencies are not penalized for the structure of a foreign system that Rwanda does not typically use. It aligns with the spirit of global conventions that focus on outcomes and avoids wasting human capital.

4. Improve Verification Efficiency and Communication:

A major cause of delays is reportedly the time taken to get “feedback approval from the applicant’s university” (Mugabo, 2020; Iremba, 2025). To address this, HEC should invest in faster verification channels – such as contacting foreign institutions through official emails, using digital credential platforms (many universities now issue secure digital diplomas that can be instantly verified), or leveraging databases like the African Qualifications Verification Network if available. Additionally, HEC should communicate transparently with applicants: if delays occur, provide a reason and status update (for example, “awaiting response from University X”). Setting up a tracking system or online portal where applicants can see progress could reduce frustration. The official 7-day timeline should either be adhered to or adjusted to a realistic timeframe with HEC held accountable to it, perhaps through service charters.

5. Establish an Appeals and Review Mechanism:

Create a formal appeals process for equivalence decisions. If an applicant is denied an equivalence, they

should have the right to submit additional information or clarifications to an independent review panel or committee at HEC. For instance, if a degree is denied because HEC believes the institution is unaccredited or the coursework insufficient, the applicant could provide evidence (like accreditation letters, syllabi, or a comparability statement from a foreign NARIC). This panel can then make a final determination. An appeals process not only introduces fairness and transparency, but also helps HEC identify any patterns of misjudgment and continuously improve its evaluation criteria.

6. Leverage Regional Frameworks (EAC and Addis Convention):

Rwanda should fully implement the commitments of the East African Community Common Higher Education Area by mutually recognizing qualifications from EAC member states with minimal bureaucracy. For example, degrees from accredited universities in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, etc., should undergo a fast-track equivalence process. This could simply involve verifying the accreditation with the national council (which could be one email to the respective commission). Likewise, Rwanda should ratify (if not already done) and domesticate the Addis Convention provisions, which call for fair and prompt recognition across Africa (UNESCO, 2025). HEC staff training on these frameworks is crucial, possibly through exchanges with other countries’ ENIC/NARIC offices to learn

best practices.

7. Update HEC Guidelines and Train Staff:

Revise the published guidelines (such as those on Irembo and HEC websites) to reflect any policy changes, and ensure they are clear and comprehensive. For instance, if invigilation letters are no longer mandatory in all cases, explicitly state the new requirements for online degrees. Conduct capacity-building for HEC evaluators on diverse education systems, credential forensics, and the importance of flexibility. This could involve workshops in collaboration with UNESCO or the African Union's ACQF project, to expose staff to how other recognition authorities handle complex cases. The goal is to cultivate an evaluative culture that is quality-assuring but not needlessly gatekeeping.

8. Engage Stakeholders and Collect Feedback:

HEC should not operate in a vacuum. Establish a stakeholder forum or periodic survey where universities (public and private), employers, recent graduates, and even international experts can provide feedback on the equivalence process. They may highlight new issues or unintended consequences early on. For example, if certain countries' verification is consistently slow, maybe a memorandum of understanding could be signed to expedite it. Or if employers are concerned about certain foreign programs, HEC can investigate those specifically. Continuous dialogue will help HEC stay responsive and adjust

policies in a timely manner, ensuring relevance over the next decade.

9. Promote Awareness of Revised Policies:

Once improvements are made, conduct an information campaign to inform current students and Rwandan diaspora about the equivalence process. Many Rwandans abroad worry about HEC recognition; providing up-to-date information can help them make informed decisions (e.g., choosing an accredited program, knowing what documents to keep). It will also signal internationally that Rwanda is aligning with global norms, potentially encouraging more academic cooperation. Clear FAQs, helpdesks, and maybe a dedicated "credentials recognition" page that outlines how Rwanda recognizes foreign qualifications (citing adherence to Addis Convention, etc.) can improve perceptions and compliance.

10. Leverage Online Graduates for Capacity Building:

Establish a national initiative to engage returnees from reputable online programs in advisory and capacity-building roles. These individuals can serve as consultants, guest lecturers, or EdTech mentors in local institutions, helping Rwanda build domestic expertise in flexible learning. This not only validates their educational investment but channels their knowledge into systemic reform.

11. Catalyze Domestic Online Education Through Diaspora Integration:

Rather than adopting defensive measures that penalize foreign online education, HEC

and the Ministry of Education should take a proactive role in encouraging Rwandan universities and private investors to develop robust, accredited online and distance learning programs. Technology-enabled education is no longer an optional trend—it is the future of scalable, inclusive learning. Graduates who studied through reputable foreign online systems possess unique experience and digital fluency that can help design, test, and mentor such programs locally. Rwanda should create pathways for these returnees to contribute to curriculum design, faculty training, and virtual assessment systems. Doing so will reduce dependence on foreign programs while enhancing local capacity to serve growing demand for flexible, high-quality education aligned with Rwanda's digital transformation goals.

12. **Enhance Transparency to Prevent Corruption and Exploitation:**

HEC Rwanda should publish clear, accessible, and regularly updated guidelines regarding degree equivalency processes, including all accepted forms of verification for online and distance degrees. A standardized, public checklist — supported by digital tracking of application status — would reduce applicant vulnerability to exploitation. In addition, a formal grievance redress system should be established, allowing applicants to report fraudulent intermediaries or suspicious demands. This step is essential not only to protect citizens but also to safeguard the credibility of Rwanda's qualification recognition

system in the eyes of its regional and international partners.

13. **Deploy a verifiable-credential ledger (pilot 2025–2027):** Partner with the East African Community's Common Higher Education Area to roll out a public-permissioned blockchain that issues W3C-compliant verifiable credentials (VCs). Pilot projects such as Malta's *Blockcerts* and the EU's *Europass Digital Credentials* have reduced verification times from weeks to *under five minutes* while virtually eliminating document fraud (European Commission, 2023). A shared EAC ledger would allow employers and universities to scan a QR code and instantly confirm authenticity, aligning the reform with Rwanda's Smart Rwanda Master Plan.

By implementing these recommendations, Rwanda's HEC can transform the equivalence process from a point of contention to a facilitator of educational and professional mobility. The recommended changes strive to maintain academic rigor — Rwanda would continue to reject mills and fakes — while removing unnecessary obstacles for bona fide graduates. This balance is crucial for Rwanda to fully harness the benefits of its citizens' global educational pursuits and to attract talent in an increasingly connected African higher education space. Each recommendation addresses a specific gap identified in our analysis, and together they offer a roadmap for aligning policy with practice in the decade ahead.

Ultimately, a more open and efficient degree recognition system will support

Rwanda's journey toward a knowledge society, ensure that competency and innovation are rewarded (no matter where the learning occurred), and strengthen the country's leadership in regional education reform. The time is ripe for HEC Rwanda to embrace these changes, with the evidence clearly indicating that doing so is not just a bureaucratic improvement, but a strategic move for the nation's educational and economic future.

In the researcher's philosophical lense, at stake is not merely administrative efficiency but Rwanda's epistemic sovereignty. An equivalency regime that discounts non-traditional pathways risks reinscribing colonial hierarchies of knowledge, where validation flows north-to-south and power resides in paper rather than proficiency. Reform, therefore, is a moral imperative: to recognise learning wherever it occurs and to unlock the full imagination of a knowledge-based economy.

Limitations and Research Pathways: This study relies entirely on secondary data and desk-based policy analysis. While this affords a panoramic view of systemic dynamics, it does not capture the lived experiences of affected graduates or HEC evaluators. Future research should therefore: (1) Conduct a nationwide survey of foreign-degree holders to quantify average processing times, informal costs, and psychological stress. (2). Model a cost-benefit scenario comparing the status quo with a blockchain-enabled credential ledger. (3). Undertake a gender-impact evaluation to test the intersectional hypothesis advanced in Section 3.2. Longitudinal ethnographic work inside HEC could also illuminate hidden bureaucratic routines that desk reviews cannot detect.

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